Wellbeing and the Wild, Blue 21st Century Citizen

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Introduction

The last ten years have seen a marked rise in the numbers of people choosing to swim in lakes, rivers or the sea, an activity variously labelled as open water swimming, sea swimming or wild swimming. This chapter considers reasons for this trend in the context of the United Kingdom through two deceptively simple modes of explanation: the individual benefits and attractions of wild swimming and wider contemporary values and fashions encouraging the growth of this activity. The dominance in contemporary health promotion of calls for greater exercise as a route to fitness, improved health and longevity appears to offer an easy explanation for why wild swimming has seen a surge in popularity: the health and wellbeing gains that are possible from swimming appear self-evident and, in the context of exhortations to exercise, provide sufficient explanation for the increase in uptake. The focus, therefore, of the chapter is directed less to why some people's preferred response to such exhortations to exercise is to take up swimming, but why their response is to choose a variant of swimming that is outdoors and in open and relatively 'wild' bodies of water. After first describing the phenomenon of the growth in wild swimming, the chapter reviews arguments for the benefits that wild swimming may bring for health and wellbeing. This prompts a subsequent section arguing that the literature on wild swimming, both academic and autobiographical, shares a number of elements that effectively reveal convergence in thinking about wild swimming. The chapter then explores how this dominant approach to wild swimming may be understood as embedded in wider historical and contemporary narratives which serve to include only some aspects of wild swimming whilst excluding others. The final sections bring the benefits and the wider narratives together to briefly reflect on this dominant orientation in understanding modern enthusiasms for wild swimming.

The Wild Swimming Phenomenon

Wild swimming in the United Kingdom has been a phenomenon of the 2010s. Earlier times have seen outdoor swimming come in and out of fashion including a mediaeval interest in bathing, the rise in the 18th and 19th centuries of seaside resorts (Parr, 2011) and the expansion in the 1920-30s of lidos and swimming pools across Europe as concerns moved from cleansing to health and the attention to outdoor sport associated with fascism (Bolz, 2012; Dogliani, 2000; Marino, 2010; Pussard, 2007). What is, perhaps, different with the contemporary vogue is the explicit engagement in rather unstructured spaces, the wild places of sea, rivers and lakes. The swimming activity undertaken can vary hugely, from the demanding exertions of competitive or long-distance swimming through to the gentle routine and short swims or dips. In the United Kingdom, the growth in participation came to the attention of the media in the mid-2010s, leading to a flurry of newspaper coverage in 2015 (see for example, Etherington, 2015; Laville, 2015;) and a concomitant decrease in numbers swimming in public pools (see Rhodes, 2016). Overviews of the phenomenon consistently date its appearance to around 2006-08 and as associated to the first organised one mile swim in Lake Windermere in 2006 and the inclusion of the triathlon and the swimming marathon as Olympic events in the 2008 Beijing

games (Laville, 2015). The first organised swim in Lake Windermere in 2006 prompted the launch of the Outdoor Swimming Society with just 300 members (https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/); by 2015, the membership numbered 23,000. The first formal mass swimming event of the society was the Great Swim in Lake Windermere in 2008, with 3,000 participants. This has become an annual event and not only at Windermere but also in other locations; by 2015, over 20,000 registered participants engaged in five annual Great Swim events. . In addition to these large, high profile events, in 2015 there were over 170 smaller wild swimming events of varying distances and locations being run in the United Kingdom. There are also a few longer swimming events on offer, including a ten kilometre marathon swim in Lake Windermere for which places for the 2016 event were almost sold out within a few days of registration opening (Laville, 2015).

The growth in participation and interest has supported a dedicated magazine launched in 2011 as '*H2Open*' and later rebranded in 2017 as *'Outdoor Swimmer'* which is now published monthly (https://outdoorswimmer.com/). The Outdoor Swimming Society has mapped locations across the country suitable for wild swimming, which are available on their web-site or through the publication *'Wild Swim'* (Rew, 2008) and there are several on-line sites where swimmers provide detail and advice about specific sites (for example, www.wildswimming.co.uk). The rise in wild swimming participation has been accompanied by a recent outpouring of autobiographical writing about the experience (Fitzmaurice, 2017; Heminsley, 2017; Lee, 2017; Minihane, 2017; Peters, 2014; Shadrick, 2017; Wardley, 2017); this emerging trend bridges nature writing and autobiography and has already been termed 'waterbiography' by Jenny Landreth in relation to her own account, '*Swell*' (Landreth, 2017). This trend of waterbiography was initiated at the turn of the Millennium with Roger Deakin's autobiographical account '*Waterlog*' (Deakin, 1999), an account which is now regarded as a classic of the genre of new–nature writing (Moran, 2014).

The Benefits of Wild Swimming

Across a number of disciplines and range of methods, a body of evidence supports a narrative that being outdoors and particularly in the green and blue spaces of vegetation and water, is good for health and wellbeing. This research, to date, mostly relates to green spaces (for example, Cleary et. al., 2017; Wheeler et. al., 2015), but increasingly researchers are extending this work into considerations of blue spaces (for example, Gascon et. al., 2017).

The associated benefits of any form of bodily exercise for physical and mental health is documented through a biomedical frame drawing on biological and physiological understandings of how the body functions (Pinedo and Dahn, 2005; https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/fitness). This includes psychological benefits to self-esteem and identity (Liu et. al., 2015) in which gains for health are acquired and maintained for the individual body through individual physical exertion, achievement and sense of control. Through this lens, apart from variations in which muscles are exercised and the degree of exertion, swimming brings the same kinds of benefits as any other form of exercise and swimming outdoors may be little different to any other form of swimming. In a biomedical framing, while exercise may have pleasurable dimensions, these are only of interest for health gains in terms of furnishing the motivation to exercise. By contrast, framing benefits of exercise in terms of wellbeing, rather than a biomedical focus on physical and mental health, draws attention to the body as the site of emotions, sensations and social encounters. Explorations of these subjective experiences

in natural environments identify therapeutic aspects of situation, immersion, symbolism and achievement which may all be integral to effecting higher self-esteem but not only as mental states but also as embodied states (Bell et. al., 2018; Doughty, 2013).

There is a suggestion in much of this research, intentionally or not, of universal principles at work. The Biophilia Hypothesis, extended in this volume's focus on Hydrophilia, explicitly argues that humans have an innate inclination to affiliate with other forms of life that is, at least in part, genetically evolved (Wilson, 1984). Other explicitly universalist explorations involve how humans respond to colours which, although a nascent science, suggests that the green-blue part of the spectrum may be relatively relaxing both psychologically and neurologically (Elliott and Maier, 2014); similar associations are proposed about the relaxing effects of the sounds of water (White et al., 2010). A distinctive strand of research with specific relevance to wild swimming argues for universal health and wellbeing benefits from regular immersion in cold water (Buckley, 2015). Less explicitly, research reporting a pattern of association between self-reported health and coastal proximity throughout England tends toward a universalistic tone (White et. al., 2013). And while cultural meanings are often nodded to in passing, those special sites that have a reputation for healing and spiritual renewal, are consistently, and across a range of different cultures, characterised by the presence of water which again hints at something essential and universal to human experience (Smyth 2005). This tendency to imply that benefits from green and blue spaces are able to be generalised for all of humanity is countered in geographically informed work that explicitly foregrounds experience as always necessarily situated in given times and places. In this, the restorative effects claimed for being and moving in green and blue spaces are always necessarily produced relationally, culturally mediated and learned (Bell et. al., 2018; Conradson, 2005). To-date, much of the existing literature on the benefits of blue space relates to the experience of being near, beside or, occasionally, on water (Bell et. al., 2015; Finlay et. al., 2014; Nutsford et. al., 2016; Roy, 2014; Völker and Kistemann, 2013). Swimming however adds a distinctive dimension to the experience of blue space through being fully in the water, of immersion. Physical immersion in the water might be seen as a direct corollary to the reported benefits to wellbeing that come from a sense of immersion in greenspace (Bell et. al., 2018), but there is a significant difference in that water is not the given medium for human life. We do not routinely register the touch of being in air unless it is very windy; we may register temperature, but not touch. We are, however, very aware of the touch of being in water. Moreover, again in contrast to the immersive experiences of being in green spaces, we actively have to learn to be immersed in water, to swim, to breathe and to pay attention to the attendant risks (Straughan, 2012).

This distinctive quality of immersion in an 'alien' medium is associated with an emerging attention in both research and 'waterbiography' that privileges first-person experiential accounts of swimming. Research on the subjective benefits of being alongside green or bluespace often underplays the presence of the material body in favour of cognitive accounts, but an account of swimming very much insists on the body's centrality. As its proponents will frequently point out, swimming, and especially wild swimming, exerts all parts of the body and involves awareness of all the senses, but with an unusual emphasis on the touch of the water and on proprioception, the sense of where parts of the body are in a context of feeling weightless or flying in water (Straughan, 2012). The sensation of temperature of both the water and the body also features frequently in conversation amongst swimmers, at least in Northern climes and constitute one of the sources of risk to wild swimmers (Tipton and Bradford, 2014). Thus, Elizabeth Straughan describes her and others experiences of

scuba-diving in Mexico through an emphasis on touch, on the sensuous encounter of the materialities of diving and the diving body with the water that produce the particular experience of place. She also attends to the sounds, the quietness of diving and how the practices of diving produce an almost meditative and calming encounter that chimes with the literature of therapeutic landscapes (Straughan, 2012). In a less exclusive type of swimming, Ronan Foley, uses interviews with sea swimmers in Ireland for an account of how therapeutic benefits endure beyond the moment of the fleeting experience. The positive embodied emotions of Foley's swimmers occur repetitively and, as such, layer or sediment a sense of being well accretively and in relation to the particular places and practices (Foley, 2017). At the same time, both studies flag the potential risks of wild swimming and the ways that swimmers monitor their environment, or comment on irresponsible behaviour in others. Part of the gains for wellbeing come through the acquisition of skills to function in the medium of water whether through training in swimming techniques, in using technologies as in scuba diving or in monitoring one's own body and the subsequent pleasure of exercising competency in this acquired expertise (see Straughan, 2012). Moreover, the heightened awareness of the body in the alien medium of water and the working of the body through swimming effectively renders the body differently as it becomes a body that feels at home in the water (Throsby, 2013).

A Dominant Approach to Wild Swimming

The attention to the experience as encounter between water, body, sensation and emotion is explicitly complex and relational; wellbeing is emergent within the assemblage of embodied material and emotional components. The academic work complements the highly embodied accounts in the emergent genre of waterbiography by theorising the wild swimming experience. Nonetheless, despite the insightful contributions, this interacting set of autobiographical celebration and academic attention to embodied emotion presents wild swimming within a limited frame of understanding. First, despite the conceptual lens of relationality, the focus is sharply on a highly individualised and largely inward-looking experience. Indeed, the heightened awareness of the body in water effectively emphasises the contours and borders of the individual self. Secondly, many of the activities explored, especially in the academic literature, require investment in equipment and technology and, as such, limit participation to higher income-bracket earners. Sports England (2015) makes this observation about outdoor activities in general. The sea swimmers at two sites in Ireland in Foley's account of accretive wellbeing (2017) present a more inclusive form of wild swimming in that the sites are well-established and normalised over a long history preceding the current trend, the activity is undertaken regularly and routinely and the swimmers appear to require minimal kit. Elsewhere, however, including much of the United Kingdom, and despite a sub-group espousing a no-wetsuit approach, many of those wanting to participate in wild swimming all-year-round will need as a minimum a full wet-suit. Beyond the simple form of wild swimming, there is tendency in the academic literature to engage the higher skilled, technology supported water activities like scuba-diving, marathon swimming and surfing, and often in exotic water tourism locations such as Mexico (see Straughan, 2012; Throsby, 2014). A third observation is that the academic literature is always very positive with a focus on the pleasures, the achievements and the benefits for wellbeing, an intellectualised variant of the more overtly promotional or waterbiographical writings by the avowed enthusiasts. Herein may lie a major problem with the existing accounts of wild swimming, both popular and academic, in that these are all accounts by people who like water, who like being in water and who like swimming. The term, wild swimming, itself has gained currency from its high profile use as the title of a book detailing places to swim outdoors in the United Kingdom (Rew, 2008). An account of experiencing

wild swimming might look very different from a less convinced and committed informant group. Indeed, there is a substantial and very different body of literature that focuses on the attendant risks of wild swimming in terms of rip-tides (Brander, 2013), water temperature (Tipton and Bradford, 2014), pollution (Leonard et. al., 2018) or associated sun exposure risks (Collins and Kearns, 2007). Moreover, even within the largely positively oriented therapeutic landscapes literature, there is recognition that benefits are relational, individual and may vary across time, especially the life course (Finlay et. al., 2015; Foley, 2015). Fourthly, the existing literature is quite feminised, both in being largely written by women and in the sense of extolling more gentle benefits from the immersion. There are writings by men that are framed in a much more competitive voice in the language of overcoming adversity and in particular mastery over nature (for example, Walker, 2016). These other immersions are not entirely neglected in that more masculine immersions are often seen as the norm to be countered or at least complemented. Thus Throsby's autobiographical account of marathon swimming explicitly counters the dominant narrative of achievement, mastery and overcoming adversity, gains felt only at the end of the swim, by describing benefits during the swim in terms of the feeling of the body's ease in the water (Throsby, 2014). Throsby engages gendered themes of the body further and extends her attention to how bodies feel differently competent in water to on land; bodies that feel disadvantaged on land either through physical impairment or normative aesthetic biases, come to feel themselves more positively in water. Finally, many of the accounts are very local and whilst the relationality and co-constitution of place, person, immersion and an emergent wellbeing offers important insights, wider contexts and connections are at best mentioned in passing and as such have only limited contribution to the question of why we are witnessing a marked growth in wild swimming now.

Wider Contexts of Wild Swimming

Whether framed as pre-cognitive to cognitive or as mindfulness, stillness or getting in the flow, there is a hint in some of this work of trying to access an authentic experience, that is, an experience unmediated or constrained by language or interpretation. Moreover the therapeutic benefits come in part from the opportunity to reconnect with oneself, to find or develop the authentic self through highly embodied activities such as swimming. In this, much of the writing on swimming resonates with the Romanticism of the early 1800s (Jarvis, 2015). Partly a reaction to the sweeping social and settlement changes of industrialisation and partly a reaction to the growth of scientific explanations of nature, the romantics privileged the free expression of creativity and emotions by the artist as untainted or constrained by outside influence. Nature countered the structures of the human world and a close connection with nature offered artistic health, a spur to the imagination and the opportunity to capture the ever-shifting inner emotional states. The romantic poets of nineteenth century England are particularly closely associated with the outdoors, with the green and blue spaces of nature and several are known for participating in wild swimming, seeing it as an 'encounter with the sublime' (Parr, 2011). While Blake drew on nature to rail against the 'dark, satanic mills' in a new form of protest poetry, those following on, particularly Byron, Coleridge and Wordsworth, explicitly promoted nature as, on the one hand, healing and spiritually uplifting and, on the other, as a form of testing and development of the self through performance (Jarvis, 2015).

This suggestion of seeking an unmediated authentic experience to some extent takes a contemporary form through exhortations to find and grow an authentic inner self. This move to health and happiness as a result of working on oneself involves honing the body through exercise and diet and honing inner

self-identity through positive thinking, learned optimism or mindfulness. This redirection of responsibility for wellbeing onto the inner self is evidenced not only in a health policy directed to individual actions, but also through the emergence of a new market in self-help books, courses and other commercial products (Davies, 2015; Ehrenreich, 2009). This inward-facing work is complemented by exhortations to outward-facing actions through joining groups, helping others or giving, as strategies to increase our social support and sense of self-worth (Nef, 2008). This opens all kinds of activities up as technologies of the self that are amenable to Foucauldian inspired analyses of self-care, self-actualisation and social responsibility within a project of contemporary governmentality (Miller and Rose, 2007). Wild swimming, however, does not, of necessity, share romanticism's distrust of the processes of mass production, urban living and scientific explanation as alienating humanity from itself and its valorisation of an authentic humanity which can be restored through immersions in nature. A contemporary variant of this romantic ideology, as illustrated in much of the work on therapeutic landscapes (Smyth, 2005), promotes being in organic green and blue spaces for their positive benefits to individual interior human wellbeing. These impacts are often treated as accruing through a restorative process enabled through the meanings ascribed to a reconnection with nature. Such meanings may include an implicit assumption that, as humans, we all have an intrinsic need to feel connected with the other life forms of our planet. This differs from the markedly elitist Romantic notion of artistic authenticity of experience and expression in being a sensibility that is shared across humanity. This need for connection is reflected by Robert Macfarlane, another major writer in the new-nature writing genre, who also serves as Patron for the Outdoor Swimming Society. Promoting their work in 2008, he wrote: "over the past decade or so, a desire for what might be termed 'reconnection' has emerged, a yearning to recover a sense of how the natural world smells, tastes and sounds. More and more people are being drawn back to the woods, hills and waters of Britain and Ireland." https://www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com/patron-statement/ McFarlane's desired reconnection to the natural world sees us 'drawn back' to a connection that we are 'yearning to recover' having been lost to us through modern ways of living. Research has mirrored this orientation, including, for example, through psychological explanations of the benefits of being in nature that focus on an increased sense of connectedness to nature, improved attentional capacity, greater positive emotion and better ability to reflect on life (Mayer et. al., 2009). In this mode of understanding, the reconnection to the natural world restores our sense of wellbeing, complementing rather than reproducing the Romantics belief in the need to connect with nature to escape the intrusions and influence of modern living on authentic self-expression. In the literature on therapeutic landscapes, a similar use of the language of recovery and restoration (Conradson, 2005; Korpela et. al., 2010) begs the question of recovery from what and in this framing, it is modern living itself that is too demanding (Carlisle et. al., 2012), and from which we all need to retreat periodically, often into green or blue, spaces and their restorative potential for being well. Nonetheless, despite evident differences of focus, these two forms of valuing a connection to nature also infuse each other, in that the Romantic imaginary itself is part of the relational process through which a nature-person encounter becomes constituted as therapeutic (Conradson, 2005).

This move to self-actualisation appears, then, to share with Romanticism a central focus on the authentic individual whether as individual self-actualisation or as individualised self-expression. In a society promoting exercise and where leisure itself is highly managed and highly commoditised, including the use of some green and blue spaces (for example, Conradson, 2007; Foley et. al., 2011), expressing individuality becomes ever more challenging; many outdoors activities, including the

Great Swim events, are becoming annual mass events, highly managed and involving fund-raising for charities. The growth of wild swimming has then, perhaps inevitably as its popularity has grown, manifest two co-existent trends: the commoditised leisure for self-care and social contribution through the large events of mass swims in which participants typically raise money for charity, and the solitary or small group swims in an ever expanding range of remote or 'wild' locations. For some, sociality is the main appeal, but for others there is a constant search for new experience and new expressions of individuality.

The research on the benefits of immersion in nature suggestive of this coming together of exhortations to self-care and the romantic quest for self-expression mostly ignores considerations of class. The limited work available clearly indicates the association of class with the extent of engagement with nature (Bell, et. al., 2017; Korpela et. al., 2010) suggesting that access to blue space should similarly be seen as an issue of environmental justice (Raymond et. al., 2016). By contrast, wild swimming is often promoted by its enthusiasts as the ultimately inclusive form of physical activity, offering spaces of participation that cut across differentiated communities, generations and social categories. Most people in the United Kingdom now learn to swim at school and wild swimming requires no equipment except, usually, a swim-suit. This claim for wild swimming as a democratic and egalitarian activity does appear to deliver with respect to gender. A notable characteristic of the growth in the numbers registered to join the organised wild swimming organised events has been the wide appeal of these and especially to older and female participants. Just over half of the participants in the 2014 ten kilometre marathon swim in Lake Windermere were female, making wild swimming unusual amongst outdoor activities in having a higher participation of women than men (Laville, 2015). The contemporary attraction of swimming for women builds on a history of what is perhaps a surprising acceptability of female participation in wild swimming. Therapeutic bathing by women at the seaside, for example, was acceptable, even encouraged, from 18th Century Britain onwards as long as women's bodies were visually secluded by entering the water from a bathing-machine (Jarvis, 2015; Parr 2011). In the late 1800s, demonstrations of swimming and outdoor long-distance swimming gained popularity as a public spectacle following the first swim by Matthew Webb in 1875 across the Channel between England and France. And this was a spectacle that included and celebrated participation by women. One example was Agnes Beckwith, a performance swimmer in the late 1800s, who was one of a number of women who displayed feats of swimming in a tank publicised as 'The Aquarium', and performed long-distance swims and races as public spectacle (Day, 2012). While the participation of women in such performances of athleticism and swimming skills is in some ways surprising, water has a long history of symbolic association with the feminine, at least until water became more explicitly a commodity (Strang, 2014).

The history of bathing more generally documents its uptake as a fashionable but exclusive activity primarily for therapeutic purposes in the 18th Century amongst the wealthy (Sutherland, 1997); as bathing became seen as a pleasurable, leisure activity, the development of railways in 19th Century Victorian Britain enabled a more democratic participation that was accompanied not only by the rise of commercialised popular seaside resorts but also a range of class-based conflicts, centred on bathing, conduct and norms of respectability (Parr, 2011). From the 18th Century onwards, resorts slightly further afield from the large cities started to become more attractive to the well-to-do (see Sutherland, 1997). An insistence that we need to include considerations of class within understandings of contemporary wild swimming may expose ways in which connections with green

and blue spaces express a distinctly middle class citizenship whilst simultaneously enabling a moral judgement of others.

Contemporary locations for wild swimming continue not to be equally accessible for all, not only through physical distance and financial constraints but also through social barriers. Even while officially open to all, places can generate a strong sense of who belongs in them and who does not. This exclusion is subtle, grounded often in cultural resonances and meanings for different population groups through historical use and familiarity. Such historical resonance is likely affirmed through the presence and sometimes behaviour of those who do routinely use a particular space as explored in a case of the experiences of discomfort in inhabiting a public beach in New England, USA, conventionally used by affluent residents of the neighbourhood (Keul, 2015). The sense of exclusion engendered on the New England beach illustrates the ways in which outdoor places and activities constitute particular social spaces, imbued with norms and shaping given practices. Drawing on Bourdieu, taking up a new activity, such as wild swimming, may reflect the extent of congruence between the norms of the particular social space with the potential participants' internalised sets of values and perceptions (Nettleton and Green, 2014). Those feeling comfortable in alternative spaces of activity such as wild swimming are those who already share this situated taken for granted or tacit knowledge of practice. Moreover, they not only feel they belong, but can become self-congratulatory about their activity choices and moralistic towards others judged as lacking the cultural capacities to make decisions for their wellbeing (Guthman, 2003). Leila Dawney engages the concept of embodied imaginaries as affording the means through which variations in how we think, feel and practice being in nature our encounters in the world (Dawney, 2011). An embodied imagination is central to understanding how some feel a close sense of affiliation or belonging while others may feel a powerful sense of alienation or exclusion. 'A focus on practices as productive of particular landscape imaginaries enables a consideration of how these imaginaries play out through bodies and take material form, producing certain kinds of engagements and precluding others, forming connections and disjunctures between bodies and offering experiences variously felt by different subjects.' (Dawney, 2014: 90). This approach allows the reflective subject to weave together the diverse and sometimes conflicting imaginaries of Romanticism, of alienation and reconnection to nature, of self-care and self-actualisation but further attends to the contouring of experience that is differentiated by social identities such as class, age, gender, ethnicity, mobility and so forth. Moreover, a contemporary imaginary of Romanticism as modern life alienated from an authentically human connection with nature may intersect with a noted tendency for working class lives to be stereotypically depicted, both by others and themselves, as closer to some imaginary of an authentic mode of existence. This generates an imaginary that may inform a particularly middle class anxiety about the lack of connection to the natural world and to each other which becomes expressed through choices to participate in evidently counter-modern leisure practices that are closer to nature (Dawney, 2014).

Swimming and the Wild, Blue 21st Century Citizen

The growth of the modern passion for wild swimming can be understood as emerging from an interweaving of several narratives about our relationship to nature. These include an inherent need for human connection to nature, an alienation from ourselves through modern living, the need to retreat and recover from the demands of modern living and the good citizen as one taking care of themselves and their own wellbeing. While many of these reconfigure of pre-existing imaginaries, this reconfiguration is made through the contemporary lens of wellbeing together with a narrative for

the individualised responsibility for the embodied self, both of which are characteristic of modern forms of liberal governance. Research that intimates the ways in which the potential benefits of new technologies of self-care, such as wild swimming, may be differently distributed by age, class, gender, ethnicity and so forth, redirects our attention back to the subtleties of how experience is itself systematically differentiated. Progressing an account of wild swimming that attends to social justice demands greater attention to how wild swimming itself is differentiated in terms of locations, organisational structures, technologies of immersion and socio-demographics of participation. While this differentiation of locations that are variously more popular or more elitist in access is recognised for swimming bath, lidos, spas and so forth, this is less obviously visible and under-researched in relation to outdoor settings. Foley's processes of accretive wellbeing, Bourdieu's notions of habitus, field and tacit knowledge, and Dawney's embodied imaginaries provide conceptual tools with rich potential for advancing our understanding of the benefits and limitations of wild swimming to engage nature and enhancing wellbeing in particular times and places.

The focus within the attention to the immersive experiences of wellbeing in green and blue spaces not only ignores class, but also more surprisingly side-steps direct engagement with environmental issues. These accounts, both intellectual and autobiographical, all reaffirm, even in those attending to the social, the dominant privileging of individual subjectivity within contemporary approaches to understanding our encounters with nature. Regardless of the explanatory frames drawn on, both waterbiographies and academic interrogations of wild swimming reflect back ultimately to an individualised purpose, whether that of quest, retreat or connection. While the experiential accounts often attend in tones of wonder to the aesthetics and sensory pleasures of nature, these primarily nurture human experience rather than draw human attention to the natural world. Even the activism of the Outdoor Swimming Society primarily targets increasing public access to wild swimming locations with concerns over pollution directed to the protection of wild swimmers. The writer Robert McFarlane argues that the British 'have long specialised in a disconnect between their nature romance and their behaviour as consumers'. He continues with his theme by arguing that 'British parochialism – its strong tradition of interest in the local – leads too often only to general conclusions: to a comfortable sentimentalism.' (McFarlane, 2005). While the accounts of taking up and practising wild swimming are often anything but 'comfortable' in their bodily experiences, McFarlane's claim for sentimentalism in relation to our encounters with nature in general and water in particular and a disconnect between our local perception of nature and any wider engagement with environmental concerns deserves our serious attention in future interrogations of our practices as wild, blue 21st Century citizens.

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